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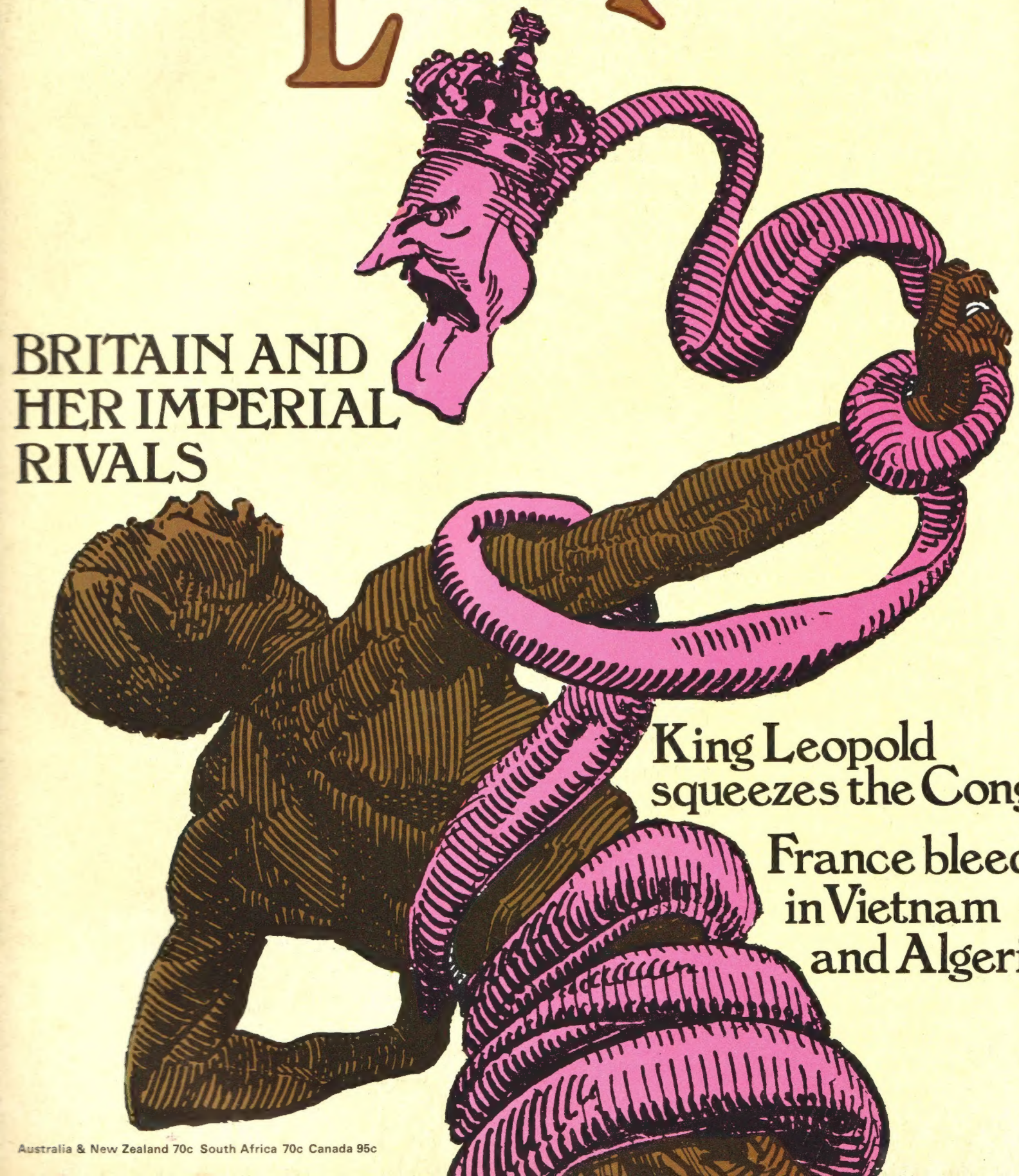

BRITAIN AND HER IMPERIAL RIVALS

King Leopold squeezes the Congo

France bleeds in Vietnam and Algeria

Australia & New Zealand 70c South Africa 70c Canada 95c

THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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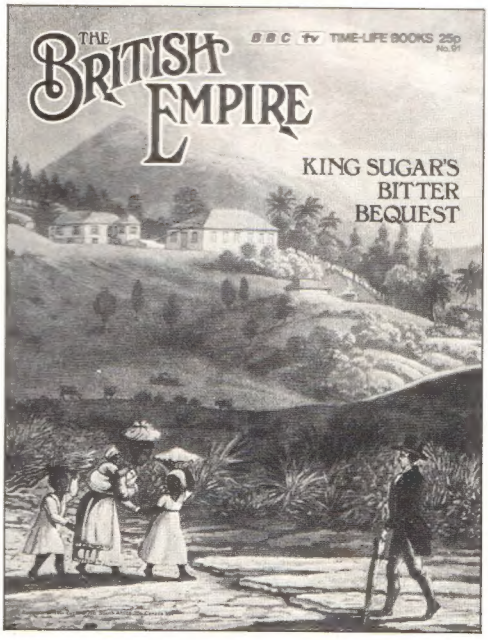

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Cover: A *Punch* cartoon of 1905 dramatizes the plight of Africans in the Belgian Congo when under the personal control of King Leopold, whose rule encouraged a scale of brutality in a way hardly possible within the more closely supervised confines of the British Empire.

BRITAIN AND HER IMPERIAL RIVALS

The vices and virtues, achievements and failures of the British Empire can be fully understood only by comparison with the empires established by other nations. The epic voyages of Elizabethan exploration and the "planting" of the first colonies acquire a new dimension when set against the conquests of Spain and Portugal in the New World. The East India Company's rule in India was a response to the highly successful Dutch trading empire in the Far East. The Victorians' faith in the virtues of the *Pax Britannica* – now much derided – acquires a powerful justification when British rule is compared with the excesses perpetrated in the Belgian Congo or German South-West Africa. And Britain's post-war imperial collapse may, when contrasted with France's disastrous failures to retain control in Vietnam and Algeria, be seen less as the result of weakness than as the result of an acceptance by a liberal power that Empire had become an anachronism.

By D.K.Fieldhouse

"I believe in the British Empire and . . . I believe in the British race. I believe that the British race is the greatest of governing races that the world has ever seen. I say that not merely as an empty boast, but as proved and evidenced by the success which we have had in administering the vast dominions which are connected with these small islands." Thus did Joseph Chamberlain announce his personal creed in a speech at the Imperial Institute in 1895, the year he became Secretary of State for the Colonies. These beliefs were almost a commonplace in the oratory of *fin de siècle* England. Lord Rosebery, unlike Chamberlain a scion of the conventionally reticent British aristocracy, outdid him in ecstatic invocation of Britain's imperial calling. This comes from his Rectorial Address at Glasgow University in 1900:

"How marvellous it all is! Built not by saints and angels, but the work of men's hands; cemented with men's honest blood and with a world of tears, welded by the best brains of centuries past; not without the taint and reproach incidental to all human work, but constructed on the whole with pure and splendid purpose. Human and yet not wholly human, for the most heedless and the most cynical must see the finger of the Divine."

And, in the same vein, Lord Curzon, the last great autocratic Viceroy of India, declared in Birmingham in 1907: "I would describe the Empire . . . as the result, not of an accident or a series of accidents, but of an instinct – that ineradicable and divinely implanted impulse, which has sent the Englishman forth into the uttermost parts of the earth, and made him there the parent of new societies and the architect of unpremeditated creations."

This was the authentic rhetoric of Empire at the turn of the 20th Century. It must be remembered that these three great men were speaking on occasions when something high-flown was required; for all we know they may have made cynical or embarrassed comments to their wives or secretaries about what they were expected to say. And it might also be remembered that by no means everyone in Britain would have shared their pride in Empire; many people, particularly the more sensitive and liberal intellectuals, recoiled from such bombast. Yet, when all reservations are made, it is likely that if a public opinion poll had asked a representative cross-section of Englishmen in the late 1890s whether they would accept the following two propositions – that the British people had a divinely ordained calling to hold and rule an overseas empire, and that they ruled their empire better than any other European power – the overwhelming majority would have answered "yes" to both.

The fact is that, in this age of high imperialism, the capacity to build and run an overseas empire seemed to most people in Britain to be characteristically and uniquely British. For them it amounted to doing what came naturally. For other nations it was different. Each European country might have its own strong points and special skills – the French were undoubtedly good at cooking and led the world in the art of civilized urban life; the Germans had the best army in Europe and were good at music; and so on. But in common thought, overseas colonization was as alien to these and all other foreign peoples as the British concept of "sport." Admittedly, foreigners might learn to play British games, though never cricket. Similarly, they might, after 1880, try to copy Britain's Empire. But running a great empire efficiently and humanely was another matter, demanding qualities which, as far as could be seen, were exclusive to Britain. So, at the start of the 20th Century, the British clung to the idea that they not only were, but always had been, the greatest imperial nation.

Of course, this was an illusion, based on a very short-run view of history. If the British had thought back to the 16th or 17th Centuries they would have seen that they were wrong. In 1600, when England had no overseas colonies, Spain and Portugal were highly successful colonial powers. In the 17th Century Britain was still competing for colonial primacy with France and Holland. By 1900, when these and other states – Italy, Germany, America and Russia – had established their own new empires in Africa and the East, their peoples were as confident as the British that they had the qualities needed in a great imperial power. For the older colonizing states there was pride in past achievements: even Italy, newly united, could cast back to ancient Rome. And the Germans, with no history of overseas colonization, could and did take confidence from their recent achievement in building a new Reich.

Clearly, the pride of Empire held and expressed by so many Britons must be qualified. We must see the British achievement in its true context as merely a part, though a very important part, of the expansion of European power throughout the world. The British Empire can only be fully understood if the British achievement is compared with that of other imperial nations under comparable conditions at particular times. There are four main periods of interest in assessing Britain's performance: the two centuries during which she rose from the ruck to primacy in America and the East; the first three-quarters of the 19th Century, when the British had the best claim to stand alone; the thirty years after 1880, which saw the international grab for colonies; and finally, the last age of colonialism, from about 1900 to the 1960s, the age of tropical empire in Africa and Asia. At the end it should be possible to decide how much truth there was in the grandiose claims made by the great imperialists of Late Victorian Britain.

In order to get a proper view of England's place in the first epoch of European colonization of the world, we need to forget the greatness of Britain's imperial future and remember what was England's position in the 16th Century. The English were latecomers to America; it was only in the 18th Century that their American colonies could compete in size, population or civilization with the possessions of Spain and Portugal. In the age of the Elizabethans whose exploits have been celebrated in this series – Drake, Hawkins, Raleigh – England was an ambitious minnow anxious to challenge the dominant pike of the imperial pool.

It had not always been so. In the past England had ruled much of France; but France had been lost, leaving only the Channel Islands as a memento. Ireland was England's only other possession, and even there her effective power was small. Since the mid-15th Century, England had been preoccupied with domestic problems; and when at last she was ready to re-enter the lists as a major European

power, she found that others had taken a long lead on her.

The world had been divided between Spain and Portugal by a Papal Bull of 1493 – modified by the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494 – by which Spain was to have most of the Americas, excluding Brazil; and Portugal took Brazil and all non-Christian lands to the east. Already by the end of the Elizabethan Age there were well-established Spanish and Portuguese colonies throughout Central and southern America, a forbidding sight to would-be English colonizers, but also a challenge and an example.

Spanish America was one of the wonders of the age. In the 16th Century, after Columbus had stumbled on the Caribbean islands in his search for a new route to China, Spanish *conquistadores*, followed by colonists and priests, founded settlements from southern California to Patagonia. There were too few Spaniards to cover so vast a continent. Only about 100,000 left Spain to settle permanently in America in the 16th Century, and of these some 57,000 were in New Spain (Mexico). Population growth, fed by further immigration, came later: by about 1800 Spanish America had some 2,500,000 white inhabitants. But in the first stage the small advance guard of Spanish settlers and officials did great things. By 1600 there were three archbishoprics, 24 dioceses, 400 parishes, 400 monasteries and a considerable number of Jesuit missions to Indians in the wilderness beyond the limits of European settlement. There were also three universities; and the first book published in the New World was printed in Mexico City in 1537. But it was not these products of Spain's devout Catholicism that the English admired so much as three characteristic features of Spanish colonialism – its system of government, its economic regulations and its pattern of economic and social life.

The Spanish system of imperial government was impressively grand. From the royal council in Madrid a vast and digni-

In a contemporary engraving, Francisco Pizarro's Spanish troops slaughter the defenders of Cuzco, Peru, during the conquest of the Incas in 1533.

fied chain of bureaucrats stretched through two Viceroys and their subordinate presidencies to urban municipalities. Outlying regions were organized into autonomous captaincies-general. At every level the King of Spain expected his orders to be carried out to the letter; and to prevent disobedience, and also tyranny, on the part of senior officials, there was always a nominated council to guard the guardians. Above all was the law. As the most legally minded people in Europe, the Spanish had issued at least 400,000 royal orders by 1681, which were then codified and published as a handbook for colonial administrators. Thus Spain created the model of an overseas empire, strictly controlled, at least in theory, from the metropolis.

She also showed how a European power could squeeze economic advantage from the wealth of settlers 3,000 miles away. Far from leaving them free to trade and produce at will, she insisted that all colonial trade must be with Spain, carried in annual fleets sailing to and from Seville. The Crown claimed a fifth of all precious metals found in the colonies and controlled all silver sent to Spain. To make America a good market for Spanish exports, the colonists were forbidden to produce many things, including, originally, even wine; and trade between any two colonies was limited or banned. This was another model which later colonial powers were to copy.

But what impressed the English most about Spanish America was the wealth and the civilization of the areas of maximum settlement. Spanish America had as many economic patterns as there were regions. Vast areas were unoccupied and in the grasslands of La Plata (Argentina), northern Mexico and the Orinoco plains there were only vast herds of cattle tended by the original American cowboys. But where there was silver – as in Peru – or where climate and the availability of Indian labour attracted settlers – as in Mexico – there the Spanish made their really distinctive contribution to American civilization – towns copied from those of Old Spain. Laid out on the pattern inherited from the Romans, these towns – Mexico City, Lima, Cartagena and many others – quickly became centres of culture as well as of commerce and government. There the rich settler lived, leaving his silver-mine or agricultural estate to be run by managers, while he enjoyed the dignity of public office and the pleasures of his great town-house, the theatre, the racecourse and the church. This was the wealth, the conspicuous consumption, that tempted the Elizabethan freebooters to ransack coastal towns and convinced Englishmen that an empire in America would make them equally rich.

Portuguese America was quite different and much less impressive. Although Portugal controlled the coastline from the Amazon Delta at the top of Brazil to the Bay of Paranagua at the bottom, most settlers were established in the north-east, in Recife, Olina, Salvador and Rio de Janeiro. By the 1620s there were only some 60,000 white inhabitants. Towns were small and unimpressive and the methods of government primitive by comparison with Spanish America. What really impressed observant Europeans was Portugal's success in establishing large-scale sugar production to feed the insatiable sweet tooth of Europe.

Portuguese vessels lie at anchor off Socotra in a 16th-Century parchment drawing, now badly frayed, that once belonged to Sir Walter Raleigh.

Sugar-cane, brought to her from Madeira, dominated Brazilian economic life, and dictated the shape of colonization. Sugar needed large units of production to justify the expensive equipment used in refining. That meant a dispersed rural population, centred on the big house of the plantation and its surrounding factory buildings. This left little scope for large towns. Sugar also needed a large labour force, and, since the local native population was too small to supply it, Portugal began the importation of Negro slaves from West Africa. There were some 14,000 slaves by 1580 and in the early 17th Century they were imported at the rate of about 8,000 a year. The English did not covet Brazil (though the Dutch later made an attempt to take it); but French, Dutch and English alike admired the sugar plantations and were to copy the Brazilian pattern – estates, big houses, African slaves – when at last they had Caribbean possessions in which it could be repeated.

This was the America which the Late Elizabethans admired and envied. A century and a half later they no longer admired, nor had cause to envy, the Spanish and Portuguese empires, for they had their own colonies which were rapidly overtaking those of Latin America in population, wealth and culture. How did this happen? How did the British, together with the French and Dutch, challenge the Iberian monopoly of America? Why, furthermore, was it the British rather than their rivals who emerged victorious, at least until their own American colonists threw off British rule in 1776? The British were successful in establishing a foothold in America because, despite its magnificence, the Spanish colossus had feet of clay. In Europe, Spain was a declining force from early in the 17th Century, though the extent of her weakness did not finally become clear until the 1660s. Constantly preoccupied with war in Europe and with a decadent economy, the Spanish government could not effectively police its vast American claims. More significant, Spain had left unoccupied all of North America from Florida to the St. Lawrence, as well as much of the Caribbean. Here was a vacuum for northern Europe to fill.

France was by far the largest of the three competitors in population and resources and had as strong a seafaring tradition as England or Holland. The Dutch were few in numbers, but had the largest merchant marine and the most sophisticated banking system to finance colonizing ventures. The English stood between the two. All three initially relied on private companies or individual entrepreneurs to establish settlements. Until the 1660s their achievements were closely comparable and the future remained open. The Dutch occupied much of north-eastern Brazil, Guiana, several Caribbean islands and New Amsterdam (later New York). The English also took Caribbean islands and set up colonies in Virginia and New England. The French occupied the largest available Caribbean islands and established themselves in the St. Lawrence. By 1667 the tide had turned against the Dutch. Portugal had regained Brazil and the British took New Amsterdam. Thereafter, the Dutch lost interest in America and concentrated on Asia.

But it was another century before France dropped out of the running.

This chart of the Arabian Sea showing the Portuguese trading empire at its zenith in 1575 records the wealth of bases in the Middle East that were the envy of Elizabethan merchant seamen.

Each major European war from 1702 to 1763 took its toll. Preoccupied in Europe, the French could never match British seapower in the Atlantic. They lost Acadia (Nova Scotia) in 1713, Quebec in 1763 and might have lost more if Britain had not, for diplomatic reasons, returned France's sugar islands in the Peace of Paris of 1763. With Martinique, Guadaloupe and St. Domingo, France remained a colonial power. But it was the British who had won the race in continental America. They won because at each stage they had concentrated on using their naval power against rivals who had, from their continental position, to wage their wars primarily in Europe. But there were other factors. Effective colonization in the New World required ample colonists and a domestic economy capable of supplying colonies with the capital and market they needed. France and Holland could produce capital and had a market, but they lacked enthusiastic colonists. Britain had all three. By the 1760s there were some 1,600,000 settlers in British North America and only about 80,000 French in Quebec. Britain had the largest merchant marine and the strongest manufacturing system in Europe, and the largest market for colonial exports. She won the race for America, partly because she chose to concentrate her efforts there rather than in Europe, but also because she was best equipped to be a colonizing power.

We are the Portuguese from the West,
We go to seek the countries of the East.

Thus, in 1527, wrote the Portuguese poet, Luis de Camoes, in the only great epic poem ever written on the theme of European empire. His hero was Vasco da Gama whose epoch-making voyage in 1498 round the Cape of Good Hope to Calicut in India opened up the oceanic route to the East and blazed the path to China and Japan. Gama was, of course, building on the heroic work of two generations of Portuguese mariners who had left Lisbon to penetrate the unknown seas to the south and the east. Their reward was Europe's first empire in Asia.

It was very different from any European empire in America – an empire of trade, not territory. It seemed inconceivable at the start that Portugal could ever establish sovereignty over the powerful and often very large empires of Asia. Portugal's technique was to establish a string of fortified bases to act as collecting centres for trade and to provide repair facilities for ships and security against attack. These bases stretched from West Africa to Mozambique and then to Ormuz, Diu, Goa, Calicut, Colombo, Malacca, Java, the Muluccas, Macao and Nagasaki. The strength of the system was that it was cheap to maintain; its weakness was that it was highly vulnerable to attack by local Asian powers and rival Europeans. It lasted only for so long as neither threat was serious.

In the event, the Portuguese enjoyed their unique position for about a century. By the last decades of the 16th Century the maritime states of northern Europe – England, France, Holland – who had watched greedily while Portugal grew rich on the spice trades of the East, were determined to break her monopoly. The fact that after 1580 Portugal was annexed to Spain, their common enemy, gave them an excuse to attack Portuguese possessions. With their greater resources of men, money and ships, it was inevitable that in the long run they would destroy Portugal's empire in the East, though their success could never obliterate her pioneering achievements.

Indeed, for a century and a half the English, French and Dutch traders merely aped their Portuguese predecessors. They followed the same routes – though the Dutch, unlike the Portuguese mariners, chose to use the Cape of Good Hope as a port of call. They traded in the same goods, established similar small bases when they could not annex those of Portugal, and concentrated on trade, not territorial empire. The main difference was that, whereas Portuguese trade had been controlled by the Crown as a royal monopoly, these countries used private joint-stock companies, each with a monopoly of its country's Eastern trade, to finance and promote national enterprise. The first English East India Company was founded in 1600, the Netherlands East India Company in 1602, the French East India Company (following a number of unsuccessful earlier companies dating from the 1620s) in 1664. Once established, these companies competed among themselves, using force if necessary, for the lion's share of the spoils.

The Dutch were the early victors in this competition for the East, seizing key Portuguese bases and establishing a virtual monopoly of the spice trades of the Indonesian Archipelago. From their main base at Batavia (Djakarta) in Java they radiated westwards to Surat in western India and eastwards to Japan. Their technique was that of Portugal: to make treaties with local rulers giving the right to establish a trading base and if possible a monopoly of trade with Europeans. In some places, particularly Java, they imposed a tribute payable in spices – pepper, nutmeg, cloves, coffee. In trading centres such as Surat they bought the luxury manufactures of the East – textiles, carpets, metal-work. But in the Banda Islands, and at Amboyna in the Moluccas, the Dutch established effective political control in order to monopolize the valuable trade in nutmegs and cloves; and in 1623 they forcibly ejected the English Company traders from Siam, Japan and the East Indies.

Indonesia thus became effectively a Dutch monopoly, and remained so until the end of the 18th Century. During the Napoleonic Wars, when Holland was occupied by France, the British seized these Dutch-controlled islands and bases; and they handed them back, shorn of Ceylon and Malacca, after 1815, only on the condition that they remain open to international trade. In the meantime the British had been compelled to concentrate their efforts elsewhere. India became their main concern. Here there was no scope for territorial control until the mid-18th Century. Britain acquired Bombay in full sovereignty from Portugal in 1661 as part of the dowry of Catherine of Braganza, the wife of James II; but elsewhere she had only two fortified bases, Madras and Calcutta – both on lease from Indian rulers – and a number of trading centres in coastal towns. The French were in precisely the same position by the early 18th Century. Their main centre was Pondicherry, with a number of trading forts and warehouses elsewhere.

This geographical distribution determined the pattern of rivalry between Britain, France and Holland in the East. With Portugal holding only a few isolated forts such as Goa and Holland primarily concerned with Indonesia, Britain and France were left face to face in India ❧

THE DUTCH TRADERS

In six years from the arrival of the Dutch in Indonesia in 1596, their superior discipline, navigation and fighting prowess enabled them to oust the Portuguese, dominant in the area since 1515. After discouraging their would-be British rivals by massacring 23 of them, the Dutch East India Company, with its 150 ships and 10,000 troops, established a trading hold on the Spice Islands of the Malay archipelago that remained the envy of British merchants for the next 200 years.

2471

A Dutch merchant and an Indonesian grandee drink wine together.

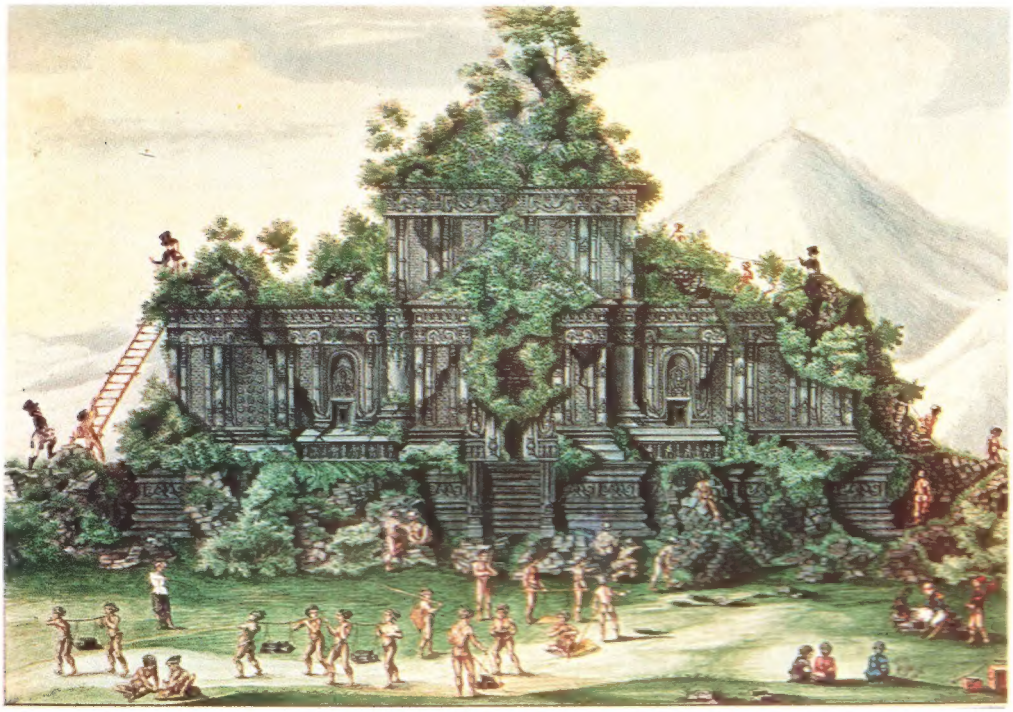
The Competitive Spirit

In June, 1596, the Dutch, still fighting at home to free themselves from Spanish rule, first set foot in the Indies. In four merchant vessels they sailed along Sumatra's west coast and dropped anchor at Bantam, north-west Java, where they were received in a friendly manner by the firmly entrenched Portuguese.

The overtures were misplaced: within a decade, the Portuguese had been eclipsed by the inexhaustible Dutch, who, with a secure headquarters in Amboyna, defeated the Portuguese on land and sea. With a fleet of 31 ships, the Dutch were soon trading in Ceylon, Siam, Borneo, Japan, India and most of Indonesia, selling glassware, velvet, armour and toys.

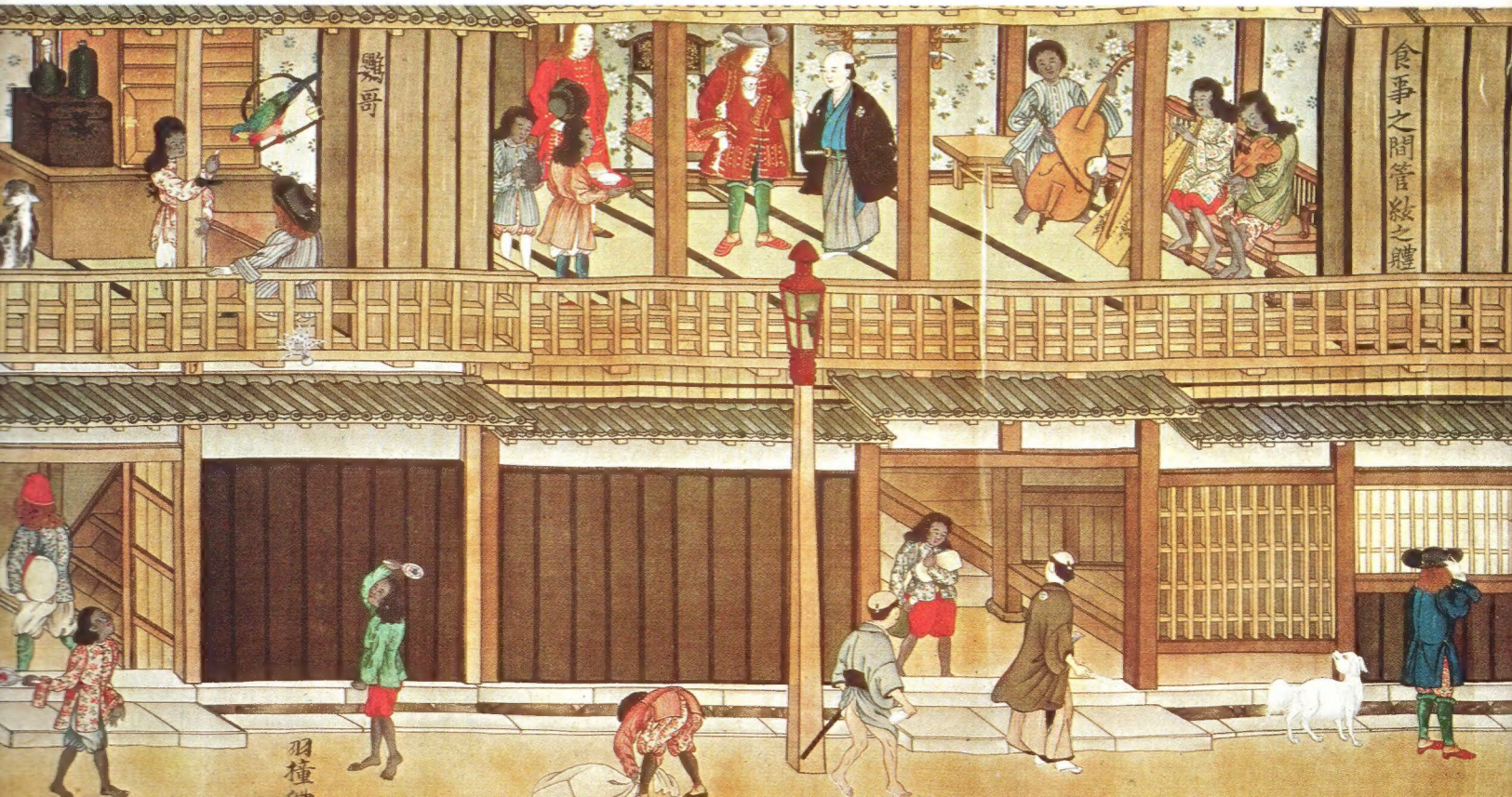
Relations with the Indonesians were on the whole very good. The King of Bali once presented a Dutch Admiral, van Eemskirk, with a beautiful girl, who – much to the embarrassment of the sternly Calvinistic Admiral – protested (in vain, as it turned out) that she wanted to stay with him always.

But the wealthy Dutch United East India Company, founded in 1602, did not have a complete monopoly of the Indies trade to itself yet. The British had still to be driven from the field.



Dutch officers supervise the cleaning of ruins of a Javanese temple in this 1807 drawing.

The neatly planned and sheltered harbour of



Amboyna – Ambon, in Indonesia – was one of the main Dutch bases in the East Indies for 200 years.

This Japanese drawing of 1690 shows rich Dutch merchants at home in the upper rooms of their trading-post above the main street on the island of Deshima, off Nagasaki.

This orderly "factory" of the Dutch East India Company at Chinsura, on the Hughli, was established in 1653. The British ousted the Dutch in 1759, at

Securing the Dutch Monopoly

For a time, the English sought to challenge the Dutch in the Indies. Having less capital than the Dutch, the English shrewdly left trade pioneering to them following them around the islands like angry wasps. Sometimes, reinforced by local mercenaries, the two battled in the streets that surrounded the ports.

But in 1618 the formidable Jan Pieterszoon Coen became Governor-General of the Indies and determined on a showdown. In 1619 he drove the English out of Djakarta, renamed it Batavia, fortified it and gained control of the seas surrounding. A massacre of 23 English merchants at Amboyna in 1623 effectively checked English commercial rivalry forcing them to turn their attention to India – while the Dutch seizure of the Portuguese stronghold of Malacca in 1641 won them the upper hand in the struggle for the trade of South-East Asia.

Ironically, the very act that gave them control of the East Indies hastened their departure from India: after East India Company forces seized Bengal at the battle of Plassey in 1757, they turned on the Dutch fort at Hughli and threw their rivals out.

Dutch economic supremacy in the Indies lasted until the early 19th Century, when Napoleon's occupation of Holland gave Britain a long-sought opportunity to establish herself as the dominant economic force in the East.

the Battle of Biderra.

An Indo-Dutch 17th-Century revolving chair.

II. The Rush for Colonies

By 1818 Britain ruled most of India, whereas France retained only five small trading bases on sufferance. Why did Britain emerge triumphant? In the early 18th Century there seemed no likelihood that either France or Britain would be in a position to acquire territorial control of India or to exclude the other; for the merchants of both countries were there as guests of the Mughal Emperor in Delhi or of his subordinate princes. It was only when the Mughal Empire weakened during the 18th Century, that the Anglo-French struggle became significant.

Once the central Mughal authority became ineffective, India became a subcontinent of insecure and competing princely states; and, in order to safeguard themselves against Indians, both Britain and France had to make political alliances and increase their military power. Success in local wars brought territorial gains to both companies and tempted them to seek more. Ultimately, French and British interests were certain to come into conflict; and the struggle was precipitated by the fact that France and Britain were at war in Europe during the 1740s and again from 1756 to 1763. War for survival in India became also a struggle to eject a European rival.

Britain won for the same general reasons as she won in Quebec. France was too preoccupied with war in Europe to spare sufficient men and ships to win in India. Naval power, Pitt's concentration on fighting France overseas, the determination of British officers in India and their skill in using Indian allies against France tipped the balance. While the British defeated the French on the Coromandel coast between 1756 and 1763, Robert Clive, in 1757, won his extraordinary victory at Plassey against the Nawab of Bengal in the defence of Calcutta. This opened the way to the conquest of Bengal and then to British control of Hindustan.

The French made a last, and nearly successful, attempt to redress the balance during the American Revolutionary War, and even after 1783 they tried to weaken British control by alliance with the rulers of Mysore and other Indian states. Napoleon had dreams of conquering India: his occupation of Egypt was a first step to the East. But by 1818 British power throughout the Indian peninsula was unchallengeable. She had seized the mantle of the Mughals and reduced all other Europeans to the status of traders on sufferance. France was left without an empire in the East, until she began to build a new one in Indo-China half a century later.

So far the story has had a single refrain. In America, Britain was apprentice to Spain, in Asia to Portugal. In each case she emerged triumphant from the ruck of new competitors. But from the early 19th Century Britain was the master imperialist to whom other states served their apprenticeship. Indeed, for almost 70 years after 1815, Britain had almost a monopoly of empire overseas. Spain lost all her American colonies in the 1820s, and was left with Cuba and the Philippines. Portugal, after Brazil became independent in 1828, retained only unimportant remnants in Africa and Asia, though she was to exploit her claims in Angola and Mozambique during the rush for colonies after 1880. France, in 1815, still had her Caribbean islands (less San Domingo which, as Haiti, had seized independence) and Senegal in West Africa.

She showed intermittent spurts of imperial energy during the following decades, occupying Algiers in 1830, additional West African bases in the 1830s, some Pacific islands in the 1840s and 1850s, and Cochin-China in 1858–62. Clearly there were smouldering ambitions in France; but they were for a long time dampened down by French preoccupation with European affairs. Holland retained Indonesia and did much to develop and exploit the Javanese economy in the 19th Century. But she had lost Guiana, the Cape and Ceylon to Britain during the Napoleonic Wars, and she never again showed expansionist tendencies. As yet no new imperial rival had appeared on the scene. Britain held the stage to herself, and by the time of Chamberlain and Rosebery the British had grown accustomed to playing the role of imperialist *prima donna*.

How did Britain use her unprecedented position? Did she take the opportunity provided by lack of serious competition to expand her Empire still wider? Did she evolve new imperial styles to match the pioneer achievements of Spain and Portugal in the past? And why is this Victorian Age commonly called a *Pax Britannica*? Britain did extend her Empire between 1815 and 1880. The Indian Raj was widened to the limits of the peninsula and into Burma and Malaya. British West African trading bases grew slowly into colonies, small and poor, but potential growing points. In the East, the convict colony at Sydney, established in 1778, grew into dominion over the whole of Australia. New Zealand was annexed in 1840, Fiji in 1874. Hong Kong was acquired in 1842; and there were other smaller territories too numerous to list. Clearly, the Empire was on the move.

This movement was not planned. Nor was Britain intent on world domination. The causes of expansion are too diverse to summarize briefly; but almost every new expansion stemmed either from the needs of possessions already held in 1815 or from the private initiatives of British subjects. India expanded because the frontiers of 1818 proved insecure. The West African settlements grew because trade required greater control of adjacent coasts and of inland trade-routes. Cape Colony and the settlement at Sydney grew because settlers needed more land. New Zealand and Fiji were annexed because white settlers were playing havoc with native society. Hong Kong was taken to provide a safe base for trade with China. Scattered islands were needed as coaling bases or telegraph stations. This was not a deliberate project of Empire, but organic growth. The British were often surprised and sometimes appalled to see their responsibilities expand so extensively. But in the end they accepted expansion as a law of nature.

How original were they in dealing with colonies once they had been acquired? Two achievements stand out. In India they found the means of governing a subject people many times more numerous than themselves as an enlightened despotism, which no European state had ever done before. Their achievement, culminating in the Viceroyalty of that grandest of all "kings in all but name," Lord Curzon, has been fully documented in the pages of this history.

At the other end of the spectrum, equally a cause for justifiable pride in a pioneering achievement, was the working out of the principle of "responsible government" in the colonies of white settlement. It had always been thought impossible to combine colonial control over domestic affairs with the maintenance of the principle of imperial authority. This riddle the British solved, by trial and error, rather than by inspiration. The path to the modern Commonwealth of Nations, a free association of equal states, was hacked out by the combined efforts of generations of British statesmen, Colonial Office officials, governors and colonial politicians. But the development of colonial self-government was already something the British could justifiably celebrate in the Jubilee of 1897.

What was the *Pax Britannica* of which they were equally proud? The phrase implies that, as the greatest of the world's naval powers, with possessions throughout the globe, Britain was for more than half a century arbiter and policeman of the world. As Europeans of all races penetrated into lands beyond the limits of European government – to Africa, South-East Asia, the Pacific – someone had to police their activities. Missionaries, traders, planters, settlers, needed protection: so did the native societies in which they operated. There was no international organization, no United Nations, to provide it. Full control was impossible. But so far as a single state could supervise a movement of peoples across the globe Britain attempted to do so through diplomacy, local influence and naval power. She was not always successful naval power could not penetrate the heart of black Africa nor change the hearts of princes. Yet in 1897 the British could reasonably feel proud that, since 1815 they had used their unique power not only to aggrandize themselves, but also to maintain order in the outer world.

But by 1897 the *Pax Britannica* was already a thing of the past. Britain could never have placed an absolute embargo on colonization by all other powers. Her monopoly had rested on the inertness of others. This inertia had now disappeared. From about 1880 the states of Europe and the United States of America rejected British supervision of the non-European world as inadequate for the protection of their interests and insulting to their national sovereignty. Accusing Britain of

A Governor of German South-West Africa interrogates rebellious Herero tribesmen in 1902, shortly before Germany initiated genocidal repression.

self-interest, they staked claims to rule those lands in which their traders, missionaries, settlers or prospectors were established. By 1914 they had virtually divided the world, outside Europe and continental America, between themselves. France had occupied most of North Africa, the Sahara, much of West Africa, Madagascar, the whole of Indo-China and several island groups in the Pacific. Germany, a new entrant to the imperial club, had protectorates – colonies in all but name – in Togo, the Cameroons, Tanganyika, South-West Africa and the Pacific islands.

Italy had built an empire in the Horn of Africa. She had failed to occupy Abyssinia, but gained Tripolitania as compensation. Russia had made a bid for Manchuria and seemed intent on dominating China. The Portuguese, seeing others interested in the hinterlands of Angola and Mozambique, had managed to make good their historic claims to much of these regions and also to Portuguese Guinea. The Spanish had occupied Rio de Oro, between Morocco and Senegal, but had lost their possessions in the Pacific and the Caribbean. The United States had seized Puerto Rico and the Philippines from Spain and had occupied several other Pacific islands, including Hawaii. Even King Leopold of the Belgians, unable to obtain support from his own government, had established a private empire in Africa under the title of the Congo Free State.

Faced by this new and unprecedented rivalry for colonies, Britain also had taken her share. In West Africa she had quickly expanded existing colonies. In Central Africa she had acquired Rhodesia, Bechuanaland and Nyasaland, in East Africa, what became Uganda and Kenya. In South-East Asia she had annexed the last remnant of Burma and expanded Malaya. In the Pacific she had shared the spoils with France, Germany and America. Why, after previous reluctance, did she now take so active a part in the scramble for empire? Were her motives different from those of other powers? Before answering these questions we must ask another: why did the other states of Europe and America suddenly start to

Italians struggle in a last stand at the Battle of Adowa, where in March, 1896, their belated attempt

to leap on the imperial bandwagon by invading Ethiopia failed, with the loss of 7,000 troops.

build their own empires after 1880? This is one of the most debated questions of modern history and there is no generally agreed answer. We can approach it from two angles: first, by considering forces affecting all the competitors; second, by looking at the actions of individual countries.

There were three main factors operating in the last decade of the 19th Century which, taken together, made colonial expansion possible and perhaps inevitable. They were the political condition of Europe, the economic development of Europe and North America, and the growth of friction between Europeans and non-Europeans in other continents. The central fact of late 19th-Century international politics was that by the 1870s there were a number of new states of the first or second rank who were determined to pull their weight in the world. Germany had been welded by Bismarck into a major power. Italy, though less powerful, had been unified by the romantic enterprises of Garibaldi and Mazzini and the cold realism of Cavour. The United States had emerged from the Civil War of the 1860s as potentially the world's greatest power, with expanding commercial interests in the Pacific and Atlantic.

The older front-rank states, France, Russia and Britain, were anxious to maintain their ranking order. In most of these states there were men who thought that colonization would increase their nation's glory and power. At first a minority, they were eventually able to stimulate a more general – though never universal – enthusiasm for empire; and this jingoism had an influence on the actions of statesmen. Even if such jingoism did not start the scramble for colonies, it ensured resolute competition once the movement was under way, particularly in the 1890s and 1900s.

Economic factors were also important. Some have argued that they were all-important, that the scramble for Africa can be explained solely by the fact that, if capitalism were to survive at all, capitalist Europe needed colonies as sources of raw materials and as markets in which to invest surplus capital. But this is a distortion. Certainly, at this stage of Europe's economic development, it was necessary for her manufacturers to expand their

markets beyond Europe and to look for raw materials wherever they could be found. It was inevitable that capitalists should invest wherever profits were to be made – in mines, plantations, railways. Europe had become the power-house of the world, generations ahead of other peoples in the means of production and exchange. It was inconceivable that so dynamic an economic system should be confined to the limits of Europe and America. But was it inevitable that this economic expansion should result in political control of the countries in which Europeans traded and invested? Many people at the time thought not; and experience after the dissolution of the colonial empires in the mid-20th Century suggests that they were right. Nevertheless, this economic expansion undoubtedly had much to do with the scramble for empire, for it was a major cause of growing friction between Europeans and non-Europeans in the outer world.

It was this friction that really caused the partition of the world. Put simply, it became obvious by the 1880s that the majority of native states could not adequately control the activities of the European traders, miners, planters and even missionaries, who were flooding in. These men, the European vanguard, were not interested in building an empire: they wanted to get on peaceably with their own business. But they often found that this was impossible. Native rulers might refuse entry or transit to traders. Mining and land prospectors came into conflict with European competitors and there was no one to arbitrate. Whole societies might fall into chaos under the pressure of foreign intrusion. In short, imperial rule became necessary both to protect non-Europeans against uncontrolled European activities and also to arbitrate between Europeans of different nationalities.

Who saw this first? Who started the new rivalry for empire? There are several contenders for the honour or shame. Leopold II is one. He was planning a commercial colony on the River Congo before 1880 and by 1882 it was clear that, unless other nations staked counter-claims, he would monopolize this vital commercial artery of tropical Africa. But Leopold had little real power. Only a

"Half a mo' please!" shouts a beefy John Bull in this 1898 cartoon, as eager imperial nations line up to share the Chinese cake.

major state could have launched a full-scale partition of Africa and the Pacific. The main contestants are Germany and France. Germany's claims to primacy rest on the fact that in 1883–85 Bismarck quite unpredictably announced very large German claims in Africa and the Pacific on the ground that in these places German nationals lacked security for legitimate activities and were obstructed by the British and other Europeans. These were genuine reasons for action; but Bismarck also saw political advantage at home in promoting a "national" policy of this kind. At the Berlin Conference of 1884–85 he insisted that a formal diplomatic division of disputed areas of Africa between the powers was the best way of avoiding international friction

Yet the French must be regarded as the first and most active imperialists of this period. Their motives were partly economic – a search for markets – and partly political – to assert their international status after the defeat by Germany in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71. From 1879 they had large schemes for breaking into the Islamic states in the Western Sudan, which barred the way from Senegal to the imagined and illusory wealth of the interior. They challenged Leopold in the Congo and threatened Britain's established commercial preponderance in other parts of West Africa. It was they, too, who took the initiative in South-East Asia, invading Tonkin (Vietnam) to open a trade-route to China via the Red River. And it was the French as well as the Germans who precipitated partition of the Pacific by challenging British interests in several island groups.

What of the other competitors? The smaller states – Italy, Spain, Portugal – merely staked claims for nationalistic reasons when the territorial auction had begun. The Russians pursued their long-matured and somewhat romantic ambitions in China on an independent time scale. The Americans held back until war with Spain over Cuba in 1898 forced them to decide what to do with the Spanish colonies they occupied. Clearly, the British were active participants in the scramble. Did they participate eagerly or with reluctance?

There is no doubt that they were very reluctant competitors, for they stood to lose by a general partition of the world, even if they gained a fair share. Under the *Pax Britannica* their merchants, planters and the rest had been free to go where they chose. Once the world was divided between the states of Europe many doors would be shut to Britons. France was feared above all. France would build a high ring of tariffs round her colonies to exclude British goods. She would, on past evidence, shut out British capital investment and probably harry Protestant missions. In the Pacific she would attack British colonies. So every French colony reduced the size of the world for Britain. To a lesser extent, the same would be true of all foreign colonies. This is why British governments tried for several years after 1880 to prevent the partition of the world.

But once it was clear that they were attempting to withstand an irresistible tide, the British had to take action. Their chosen policy was, at first, not to annex colonies, but to claim spheres of interest in order to prevent others from occupying areas in which Britons, or their colonists in South Africa and Australasia, had interests. But in the end these informal spheres of interest had to be converted into formal protectorates or even full colonies to safeguard Britain's claims. And in the 1890s sections of the British public, aroused by reports of competition between British and foreign empire-builders – for example, the race between Marchand and Kitchener for the Upper Nile – became positively jingoistic. By 1897, therefore, there was very little difference between Britain and her rivals. Struggling to keep up with the rest when they started to run, in the end she won the race. The British Empire of the 20th Century was her unsought prize.

The climax of inter-imperial rivalry came in 1914. The First World War was not fought about colonies, but about hegemony in Europe and the Middle East; however, because it exhausted all the combatants except the United States, the war ended the tense rivalry over colonies of the years since 1880. One can, in fact, trace the origins of decolonization 30 years later to the idealism generated by war and revulsion against further bloodshed. True, the imperialists did not change their spots overnight. With Germany and Turkey defeated, France, Britain, Belgium and several British colonies quarrelled in an undignified way for the dependencies of these powers. Britain and France divided the Middle East and German South-West Africa. Britain took Tanganyika, and Belgium, Ruanda-Urundi. The South Africans got South-West Africa; the Australians, New Zealanders and Japanese shared German islands in the Pacific.

It was significant, however, that under American pressure all these territories were held, not as normal colonies, but as "mandates" under the League of Nations. They were "trusts" on behalf of the native peoples and were intended to lead to ultimate – though undated – independence. Thereafter, the major powers made no further attempt to expand their empires; and when the Japanese invaded Manchuria in 1931 and Italy occupied Abyssinia in 1935 they were condemned by world opinion. Clearly, the age of imperial expansion was thought to have ended. When, therefore, one talks of imperial rivalry after 1914 it is primarily in terms of competition for the honour of running (and eventually of dismantling) an established empire better than anyone else. Was Britain, with her immensely greater experience in such matters, the best of the imperialists? By what standards should her record be judged? Standards change with the times. In the 1920s the test was honest administration and elimination of the cruelty that characterized the early history of many colonies. By the 1930s advanced opinion took preservation of indigenous social and political forms as the criterion. By the 1940s interest was shifting to economic development. In the 1960s the test was speed and efficiency in decolonization. Which of these standards should the historian adopt?

Then there is the problem of place. Identical policy objectives and methods of government might be admirably suited

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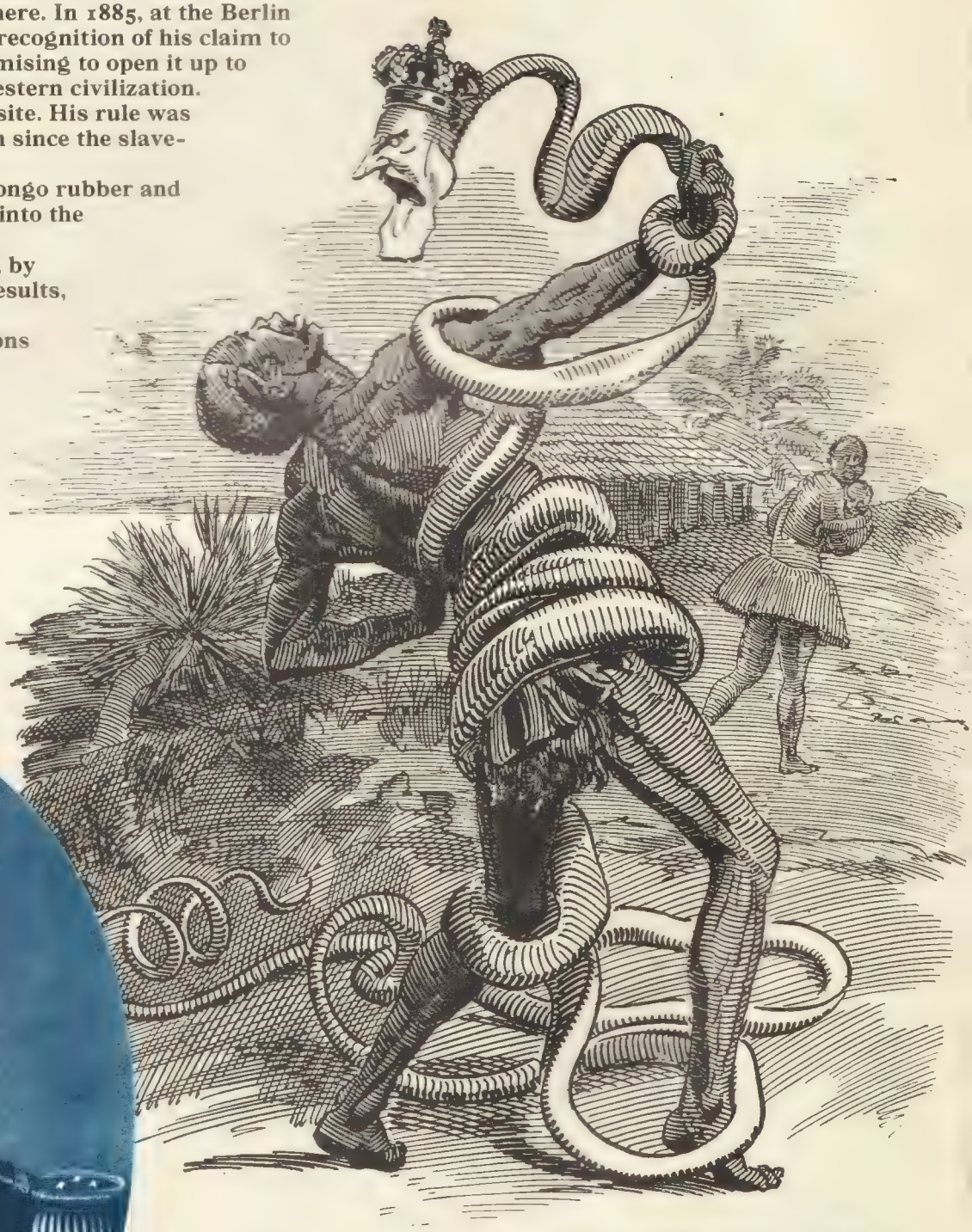
THE CONGO ATROCITIES

In 1876, the Belgian King Leopold II, eager for colonies, turned his attention to the Congo, as yet unclaimed and uncharted. He formed the Congo International Association and employed H.M.Stanley, the explorer, to obtain treaties and concessions from the chiefs there. In 1885, at the Berlin Conference, he won international recognition of his claim to the "Congo Free State," after promising to open it up to world trade and the benefits of Western civilization. The result was precisely the opposite. His rule was marked by a callousness unknown since the slave-trade ended a century earlier.

Eager to market the valuable Congo rubber and ivory, he sank his private fortune into the area and then sanctioned ruthless exploitation. A system of bonuses, by which agents were paid only for results, encouraged avarice and cruelty. Forced labour, beatings, mutilations and murder of recalcitrant Congolese became commonplace, until Roger Casement, later hanged for his alleged role in Ireland's 1916 uprising, but at this time a consular official in the Congo, exposed the atrocities. A world outcry forced Belgium to take control of the colony from the King in 1908 and to impose reforms.

King Leopold II.



This 1906 *Punch* cartoon entitled "In The Rubber Coils" dramatized the Congo's plight in the grip of King Leopold.

Three mutilated Congolese display stumps from which their hands have been struck for not harvesting enough rubber from the forests.

A Congolese slave is freed of ankle-irons in the reforms won by angry international demand.

Sir Roger Casement, after revealing the Congolese atrocities, was in 1910 appointed to examine similar barbarous activities by a British rubber firm in Putumayo, Peru.

to one type of dependency but not to another. Were, for example, the French wrong to rule French West Africa through salaried officials rather than through the semi-autonomous chiefs the British used in Nigeria – when the British used salaried officials in British India? No scientific verdict is possible. Let us instead make an impressionistic check on two out of many possible points of comparison: first, atrocities during the 40 years after 1880; and, second, the approach to colonial independence.

The accusation that Europeans used unnecessary brutality in their dealings with subject peoples is central to most hostile accounts of modern imperialism. But what was an atrocity? By the standards of civil society in Europe – excluding the two world wars – the whole process of imposing alien rule on Kipling's "new-caught, sullen peoples, half-devil and half-child" was an atrocity. All imperialists were guilty, Britain included, because they assumed the right to impose authority by force. Every "little war," and there were too many to list, was a crime. But this is to judge unhistorically. Given that the European powers had a right to rule other peoples, a common belief until the mid-20th Century, the question to ask is whether a country used more force or took more lives than was necessary to impose law and order?

The two most notorious atrocities of modern imperialism before 1939 were committed by King Leopold of the Belgians in the Congo and by the Germans in South-West Africa. Leopold's crime stemmed from greed. To make the Congo Free State pay its way he had to exploit its natural resources, particularly rubber. To collect rubber he had to force reluctant Africans to work, claiming their labour in lieu of taxes. His agents, mostly Arab slave-traders or Africans, used traditional Congolese methods of compulsion: hostages, the *chicotte* (a rawhide lash) and mutilation. When these activities became known in Europe they caused such an outcry that in 1908 Leopold had to hand over his Congo kingdom to be administered by the Belgian government. "Red rubber" has gone down in history as one of the major crimes of colonialism.

Equally atrocious were the German methods of suppressing a rebellion by the Hereros, a nomadic people in South-West Africa, in 1904–7. Since the Germans wanted their land for settlement and were seriously frightened by the rising, they decided to exterminate the Hereros. This attempted genocide was checked by an outcry in Germany but, coupled with reports of comparable brutalities in suppressing a rebellion in Tanganyika, it gave the Germans a reputation for barbarism which was used to justify the confiscation of all their colonies in the peace terms of 1919. French colonial history abounds in atrocities, from the eviction of Algerians to make way for French settlers to the huge death-rate of African labourers conscripted to construct railways in French Equatorial Africa (Çongo Brazzaville) after the First World War. American methods of suppressing the rebellion in the Philippines after 1898 were also notorious.

Three quarters of a century later, when most people assumed that the age of colonialism was over, Portugal also achieved international notoriety for the methods allegedly used in suppressing rebellion. The charge made in 1973, on the evidence of Catholic missionaries, was that, in order to check the activities of the Freedom for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) guerrillas, Portuguese troops were forcibly evicting the Africans from their villages in the Tete area of Mozambique, shooting those who refused to leave and torturing others alleged to be in league with the rebels. If these accusations were eventually proved, Portugal would certainly join the roll-call of imperial powers convicted of inexcusable inhumanity.

But, in comparing Portugal's actions in the 1970s with methods used in the past to suppress colonial resistance movements it is only fair to remember that in the 1970s Portugal faced problems greater than those of any previous imperial power. The freedom movements in her African territories were no longer isolated local risings expressing immediate grievances but were part of a vast international movement. The rebels were supplied with money and equipment from overseas, their troops were trained in the sophisticated methods of modern guerrilla warfare, and they could operate across frontiers from friendly independent states such as Zambia and Tanzania. In the background was a world opinion increasingly hostile to Portugal's policies in Africa. If the Portuguese committed atrocities, they were answering organized terrorism with its own weapons.

Were the British any better? There were certainly black spots: for example, the deliberate massacre of Indian nationalists by soldiers at Amritsar in 1919, though it ought to be remembered that the man responsible for it, General Dyer, was immediately recalled and censured.

The fact is that the worst atrocities of British imperial history lay in the distant past: in the treatment of Bengal in the 1760s, the trans-Atlantic slave-trade, and the extermination of Tasmanian aborigines early in the 19th Century. By the era of modern tropical colonization, British authorities were fully aware of the danger of leaving soldiers and administrators to act independently. Pressed by a very strong humanitarian lobby at home, Whitehall demanded high standards at the frontier. The concept of empire as a trust held by the stronger for the weaker peoples was evolved in Britain and permeated the Indian and colonial administrative services. Certainly, there were failures of control. Chartered companies, such as Rhodes's British South Africa Company were allowed too free a rein. The Boer War concentration camps were an unforeseen tragedy. Similar disasters might well have occurred if the British had chosen to resist the demand for decolonization with force, as the French did in Algeria, the Dutch in Indonesia and the Portuguese in Guinea, Angola and Mozambique. In fact, very largely because she was not by this time prepared to meet terror with terror, Britain did not offer armed resistance; and after a virtually bloodless dissolution of the world's largest colonial empire, it seems fair to conclude that in the matter of atrocities, Britain's record in the modern era was second to none.

FRANCE'S BLOODY RETREAT

France's retreat from empire was disastrous and humiliating – a sharp contrast to the relatively peaceful withdrawal that marked the end of Britain's Empire. After 1945, nationalists challenged France in Indo-China, where the Communists crushed the French at Dien Bien Phu, and Algeria, where rebels and rival French factions sparked a struggle that brought France close to civil war.

French troops escort Vietminh prisoners to an interrogation centre.

In Algiers in 1961 colonists demand that Algeria remain forever French.

Death-Knell of France's Eastern Empire

For seven years after 1945 French troops fought a fruitless and exhausting struggle against Ho Chi Minh's Communist guerrillas for renewed colonial rule over Indo-China. Then the commander-in-chief, General Henri Navarre, decided on a manœuvre to try to destroy the Vietminh in one decisive battle. In November, 1953, in a valley nine miles long by three miles wide at Dien Bien Phu, he concentrated a force of 14,000 infantry under Colonel Christian de Castries to bring the enemy into a major battle where the superior French firepower would triumph.

It was a monumental miscalculation. General Nguyen Giap ringed the valley with 72,000 troops, guns and mortars and by March, 1954, put the French airstrips out of action, so that they were dependent upon parachuted supplies. The French strongpoints fell one by one, the last on May 7. Nearly 3,000 French were killed or wounded, and France's Eastern empire destroyed.

French parachutists, above and left, land at Dien Bien Phu to replace men killed in action. Vietminh anti-aircraft guns shot down 62 French planes engaged in supply dropping and damaged another 107, thus making such operations a costly failure.

At 5 p.m. on May 7, 1954, General de Castries raises a flag of surrender over his command bunker, the end of a siege in which the French had sought a show-down by making themselves into all-too-easy targets for the Vietminh guns.

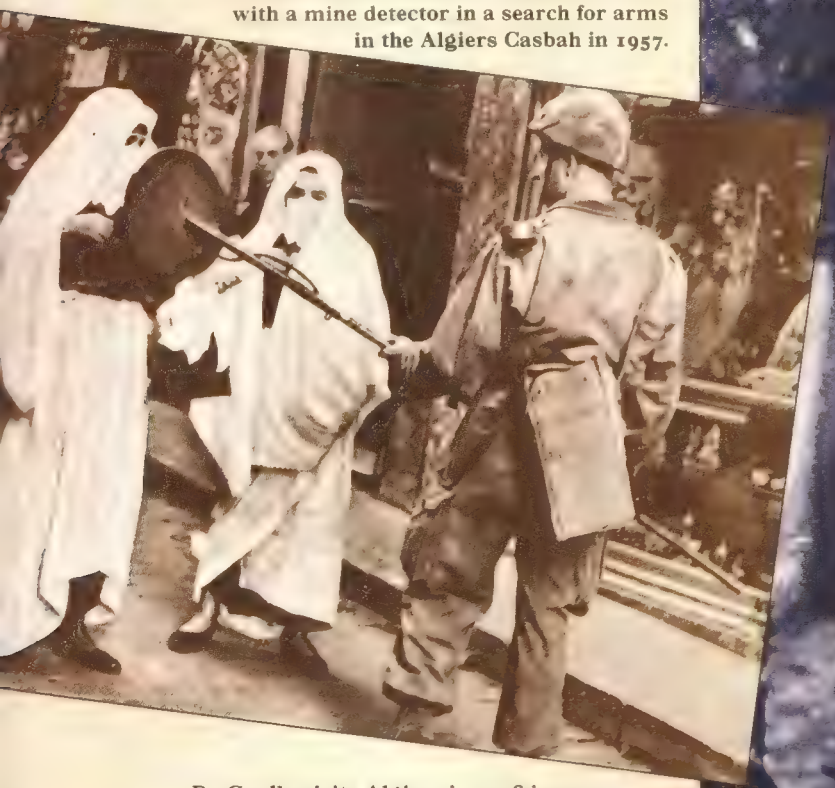
Vietminh regular infantry charge a French strongpoint.

Algerian Freedom Surge

After France's liberation in 1944, Arab nationalists sought an end to 100 years of French rule, but the settlers (*colons*) insisted that Algeria's close relationship with France – her deputies sat in the French Parliament – should continue.

France, politically divided after the retreat of her wartime hero, De Gaulle, into the political wilderness, was in no position to break the deadlock. Arab rebels first turned to terrorism and sabotage. Then, in late 1954, full-scale guerrilla warfare flared, spearheaded by the powerful F.L.N. (National Liberation Front). Brutal and sadistic tactics, including torture and mutilations, were used by both sides. In 1958, when army leaders in Algeria repudiated the weak French government, De Gaulle returned to power on a wave of popular acclaim. Many thousands expected him to reassert French control over Algeria.

A French soldier examines Algerian women with a mine detector in a search for arms in the Algiers Casbah in 1957.



De Gaulle visits Algiers in 1958 in preparation for imposing a solution in Algeria.

Security forces charge French colonials demonstrating in the streets of Algiers.

Algeria Gets Her Freedom

With the strength of the Algerian rebels growing, De Gaulle kept his options open by offering Algeria a referendum to decide its own future as soon as peace was restored, an offer that in 1962 was to lead to the country's independence.

His flexibility and willingness to negotiate with the rebels was anathema to those fanatically dedicated to an "Algérie Française," and it was they – principally the Secret Army Organization (O.A.S.) – who were now De Gaulle's real enemies.

A triangular struggle followed between De Gaulle, the O.A.S. and the Algerians. Seeking to make a ceasefire agreement between France and the rebels unworkable, the O.A.S., under its leader General Raoul Salan, launched terrorism in both Algeria and France. In Algeria they blew up schools, town halls and hospitals and murdered prominent Algerians. In Paris, they made an attempt on De Gaulle's life and organized a campaign of sabotage that brought France to the brink of civil war. But with the capture of Salan in April, 1962, their campaign slowed. It was finally ended in June, a month before Algeria became independent.

Rebel French troops erect flimsy barricades in Algiers during General Raoul Salan's 1961 revolt against the government of General De Gaulle.

Angry French colonials oppose army tanks during rioting in December, 1960, against proposals to grant freedom to Algeria.

Jubilant women and children demonstrate their joy when the war ends and Algeria becomes independent in July, 1962.

III. A Not-So-Bitter End

Finally, we must consider the approach to decolonization. Britain's attitude to the future of her colonies in Africa and Asia was determined by the experience of the Commonwealth of white dominions. Their history provided a model of the evolution from colony to separate sovereign states, and it was assumed that the future of the other colonies lay along the same path. France, Portugal and America did not accept this objective. They all believed that the ultimate goal was the full integration of the colonies into the parent state. Neither America nor France have achieved this, though the Americans have incorporated Hawaii and Puerto Rico into the union. The British never aimed at integration. Each colony was a distinct political and economic unit. Although all men born in the colonies were legally British subjects, they were regarded primarily as Nigerians, Indians and so on; and each dependency had its own distinctive body of law based on local custom and need.

In financial matters the same autonomy applied. Whereas France controlled colonial taxation and expenditure very closely and might, in principle, transfer public funds to the metropolis, each British dependency was an autonomous financial unit, its budget controlled only if it had to get special loans or grants from the British government. Britain was not unique in these respects. The Netherlands Indies and the Belgian Congo were also distinct from the metropolis and neither parent state ever thought of incorporating its dependencies.

But what of preparation for ultimate independence? It would be false to suggest that the British drew up a clear blueprint for preparing the bulk of non-settlement colonies for decolonization before the 1950s. Indeed, from 1917, when they committed themselves to ultimate Dominion status for India, they dragged their feet. India did not get full Dominion status – it was then called independence within the Commonwealth – until 1947. And if the British hesitated to transfer power to this most developed of all their dependencies, they were unlikely to force the pace in tropical Africa. It was only after 1944 that it became general policy to expedite the granting of self-government to the bulk of colonies, and in the end the speed of movement was determined as much by pressure from politically active minorities as by British planning.

That said, it is still true that the British handled decolonization better than any other colonial power. The instruments of British colonial government, especially the colonial legislative council, were well adapted to evolve into the governing agencies of an independent state; and virtually every dependency had some experience, however brief, of rule by an indigenous cabinet responsible to an elected parliament before the British handed over power. Of no other colonial empire was this true. The French, still obsessed after 1945 by the vision of a single, integrated French republic which would effectively be controlled from Paris, were reluctant to prepare colonies for total independence. Colonies were given increased autonomy and representative assemblies and France undoubtedly succeeded in educating a sophisticated élite in her colonies who would take power when it was handed over. But when the French Community was wound up suddenly in 1960, leaving all the colonies totally independent, they were in some respects much less ready to stand on their own feet than British colonies at their moment of release.

The Dutch, also, handled decolonization in Indonesia badly. They had done nothing before the Japanese occupation of 1942 to prepare the Netherlands Indies for self-rule; and when the war was over the Dutch were far too hesitant in recognizing the need for concessions. Indonesia was born in war against the mother country. The Belgians had the worst record of all. Until 1959 they had barely conceived that the Congo might demand self-government, let alone independence. No direct elections to the central assembly took place before 1960, the year in which, under pressure from a nascent nationalist movement, the Belgians suddenly granted independence. It was hardly surprising that the Congo, totally unprepared to rule itself, immediately dissolved into chaos. By dramatic contrast, the Americans, Russians and Portuguese never attempted decolonization in the normal sense. The Americans promised the Philippines independence in 1934 and this was finally given in 1946. But Hawaii and Alaska were, by their own choice, eventually incorporated as full states of the Union, Puerto Rico became a self-governing dependency, and the Pacific islands remained under American rule. The Russians also preferred incorporation to liberation. After 1917 the Central Asian territories became technically autonomous republics within the U.S.S.R., but in fact were directly controlled from Moscow. And after 1945 most of eastern Europe became in effect part of the Russian empire. Finally, the Portuguese absolutely rejected the concept of decolonization. In the end, therefore, only Britain managed to transmute a colonial empire into a commonwealth of free states by stages and without sudden change of course. This may stand as one of her greatest imperial achievements.

How, then, do the claims of the great British imperialists of the late 19th Century stand up to the evidence? Clearly, their belief that Britain was the only great colonizing power of recent times must be rejected. Until the late 18th Century that honour belonged to Spain. Even in the modern period there is a great deal to admire in the work of other colonial powers, particularly in the field of economic and cultural development, which it has not been possible to consider here: French success in educating a small élite of Africans so that they became truly men of two worlds; Belgian success after 1908 in developing the Congo.

Yet, when one has washed away the dross, a solid nugget of truth remains in Chamberlain's imperial creed. Taking the whole period of European overseas empire, from the 15th to the 20th Century, Britain was the only European power whose empire expanded and evolved continuously. Even the loss of the United States did not affect this continuity. The result was not only that the British Empire became the largest in the world's history but also that the British acquired a unique grasp of the problems of running an empire, a fund of know-how encapsulated in laws and handed down from one generation of officials and statesmen to the next. It was this remembered experience that enabled Britain to avoid the worst mistakes made by fledgling colonial powers in the two generations after 1880 and that eventually showed her how to dismantle the whole imperial edifice with the minimum of bitterness ❧

Grenadier Guards, 1914

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